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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAKAR 001934

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SNAR](#) [ECON](#) [EFIS](#) [SOCI](#)  
SUBJECT: GUINEA BISSAU:LIFE ON THE ISLANDS COMES INTO FOCUS

REF: DAKAR 1822

Classified By: Charge Jay T. Smith for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) The week of September 10-14 Poloff and FSN toured the Bijagos Archipelago, a collection of some 90 islands off the coast of Guinea-Bissau. On the islands of Bolama, Bubaque, Orango, Joao Vieira, Polao, Carache, Caravela, Caray, and Rubane Poloff learned what life was like in this remote, matriarchal society. Overfishing is taking a noticeable toll and there is little government control. Vast tourism potential is barely being tapped in part due to poor infrastructure and lack of incentives. Overshadowing all aspects of life is the rising tension of drug trafficking. The Army has shut down the main air strip that brought in cocaine from Latin America but the Navy continues to facilitate drug shipments, setting up a possible conflict between the two forces. End Summary.

REVERTING BACK TO NATURE  
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¶2. (U) The Bijagos archipelago, home to the Bijagos tribe, is sparsely sprinkled with tiny traditional villages where the way of life seems to have changed little in the last millennium. Grass-skirted women stand in groups of three with babies strapped to their backs pounding palm oil in massive mortars with two-handed pestles. Men repair fishing nets and go off to catch enough for a daily meal. In this matriarchal tribe, the women build the mud-brick houses and choose their mates. Some villages still have queens.

¶3. (U) In Guinea-Bissau in general and the Bijagos islands in particular, people are passive, focusing their efforts on subsistence living, not improving their lives. There is a lack of entrepreneurial spirit to take advantage of business opportunities linked to tourism or fishing. For example, a group of traditional dancers on Bubaque said they rarely take their show to the tourist hotels just down the road from where they reside. Instead, they spoke of the need for some unidentified entity to build them a cultural center. Infrastructure built by the Portuguese on most islands has been abandoned and their former capital of Bolama is reverting back to nature. The Greek-style administrative

building is now inhabited by cows and the once majestic park that housed a larger-than-life bronze statue of Ulysses S. Grant looks like a jungle. Grant was stolen and cut apart for scrap metal.

14. (U) It is common for entire island villages not to have a boat. In these cases, leaving the island for any reason, including medical emergencies, requires a long wait until a rare passing boat can be flagged to stop. The lack of transportation is particularly surprising considering the standard canoe used in the region is the dugout trunk of the polao tree which is abundant throughout the Bijagos. However, many people believe the tree is sacred and would rather live isolated and stranded than cut one down.

15. (U) Remote as they are, the Bijagos people have had enough contact with the outside world to know to ask for things when they meet foreigners, requesting medicines or sometimes gas money. On Ilha Caravela, men sitting in the shade on the beach apparently had life pretty good, they asked Poloff only for a soccer ball.

#### FISHING

16. (U) Hotel owners report that overfishing is hurting their businesses. They must spend more fuel to go further asea to find the big game fish that tourists want to catch. One hotelier and sport fishing guide, Laurent Durris, reports illegal fishing to local authorities when he sees it and he sees plenty, primarily by the Chinese. Last year, the government apprehended and fined many unlicensed fishing boats, but enforcement has slacked off. Most of

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Guinea-Bissau's fishing revenue comes in the form of concessions sold to foreigners, principally China and the EU, who fish the rich waters and send their catches to Senegal or Europe for processing. The only fish processing facility in Guinea-Bissau has closed down and is rumored to be a drug storehouse.

17. (U) Entrepreneurial expats from Senegal, Guinea, and Sierra Leone have set up a fish-smoking industry on Ilha de Porcos and locals claim they are breaking environmental and tax laws, but part of the disdain may simply be seeing outsiders running a successful business. There are few Bijagos who think in terms of exports or profit.

#### TOURISM

18. (U) The archipelago has major tourist potential that has barely been tapped. Four sport fishing hotels owned by French nationals pepper the islands and a fifth is on the mainland. These hotels are simple cabina-style and offer little in the way of amenities. One of the owners said he gets about 100 guests per year during the dry season. Rooms are not expensive, but transportation to the islands is, thanks to the high cost of fuel and low supply of boats equipped with 75-hp outboard motors.

19. (U) Tourists can also enjoy numerous isolated white sand beaches, lush forests and diverse fauna including sea turtles, salt water hippos, and various bird species. A government scientific research station on the island of Polao, which is protected as part of Joao Vieira National Park, monitors and studies sea turtles that come ashore by the thousands to lay their eggs.

110. (U) The tourism industry has some big barriers: only one flight per week between Bissau and Europe (Lisbon), poor infrastructure from Bissau to the islands, and almost no governmental support. Two hoteliers complained the previous Minister of Tourism was corrupt and his only interest in the islands was cashing in on drugs. But foreign investors

continue to look for ways to exploit the potential. A comfortable Portuguese-owned ship equipped with nightclub, bar and restaurant has recently started to offer weekend trips between Bissau, Bolama and Bubaque for about USD 30 round trip.

DRUGS: AN ARMY V. NAVY GAME  
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¶11. (U) The Bijagos continue to play an important role in the storage and transshipment of cocaine from Latin America to Europe. The numerous islands lightly inhabited and poorly monitored are a traffickers dream. Locals who live near cocaine entry points know little of drugs or transnational organized crime groups. They are quick to comply, no questions asked, with the "white men" who pay them relatively large sums of money to offload airplanes or container ships.

¶12. (U) Many of the large islands have Portuguese-built dirt airstrips, most out of use since the liberation war in the mid-70s but still in serviceable condition. Of the airstrips Poloff visited on the islands of Orango, Caravela, Bolama, and Bubaque, only residents of Bubaque reported the airstrip was being used as recently as two months ago. Drug flights to Bubaque used to be met by a flood of local men, including police, and children as young as ten years old. They would rush to the airstrip when they saw the planes come in two or three times per month, even if it meant running out while school was in session. Traffickers would pay them to move packages from the airplane to fast boats waiting nearby; the youngest boys made about one dollar each time. Children also reported bringing packages to the nearby tourist hotel Kasa Afrikana.

¶13. (U) Traffic stopped on the Bubaque airstrip when a military contingent from Mansoa set up a detachment to secure the strip from drug flights. The detachment commander told Poloff the operation was directed by Armed Forces Chief General Batista Tagme Na Waie and that he speaks to the

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General daily. After taking control of the airstrip, Tagme told the press that Star-2 surface to air missiles had been deployed and threatened to shoot down any flight suspected of carrying drugs (see ref tel). The detachment commander confirmed a Star-2 was in Bubaque but would not show it to Poloff.

¶14. (U) Also on the island of Bubaque and several other islands is a Navy presence. According to many people who live on Bubaque, the Navy's chief purpose for being on the islands is to facilitate drug trafficking. The Governor of Bubaque said there is no coordination between the Army and Navy and in fact when the sailors wander up the hill away from their boat they must change out of uniform to avoid confrontations with the Army. A new Navy installation is being built on Ilha Caravela. Locals did not know the purpose of the new post, which is a large multi-room concrete block structure about 200 meters up from the water.

¶15. (C) Durris (Protect), the sport fishing guide, described a drug scene he witnessed in the open water beyond Ilha Caravela while fishing with tourists. A number of men in locally built canoes were offloading packages from a small container ship at sea. He immediately left the area for fear of being identified as a witness to drug trafficking. On his way back to port, he was met by several military boats with armed soldiers who stopped and questioned him about anything he had seen. Durris lied that he was in a different area and saw nothing. The military left him alone and continued in the direction of the container ship. He was certain the military involvement was to help, not stop the traffickers and, indeed, no news of a drug seizure followed the event.

COMMENT  
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(C) The wealth and control of the Bijagos belongs to foreigners, be they hotel owners, fishermen, or drug traffickers. Locals peacefully, if disinterestedly, co-exist, taking whatever gifts are offered. With international pressure growing on narcotics efforts, the central government in Bissau is only recently taking an interest in controlling the territory.

(C) The apparent cross-purposes of the Army and Navy could be a fault line for future conflict. It remains to be seen what Tagme's true intentions are, but most observers believe he is more interested in running a professional army than personally enriching himself. Whether he has the gravitas to control the Navy chief Jose Americo "Bubo" Na Tchuto is in doubt, especially as the latter gets richer from his illicit gains.

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